

Michigan Time Traveler

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KIDS' History

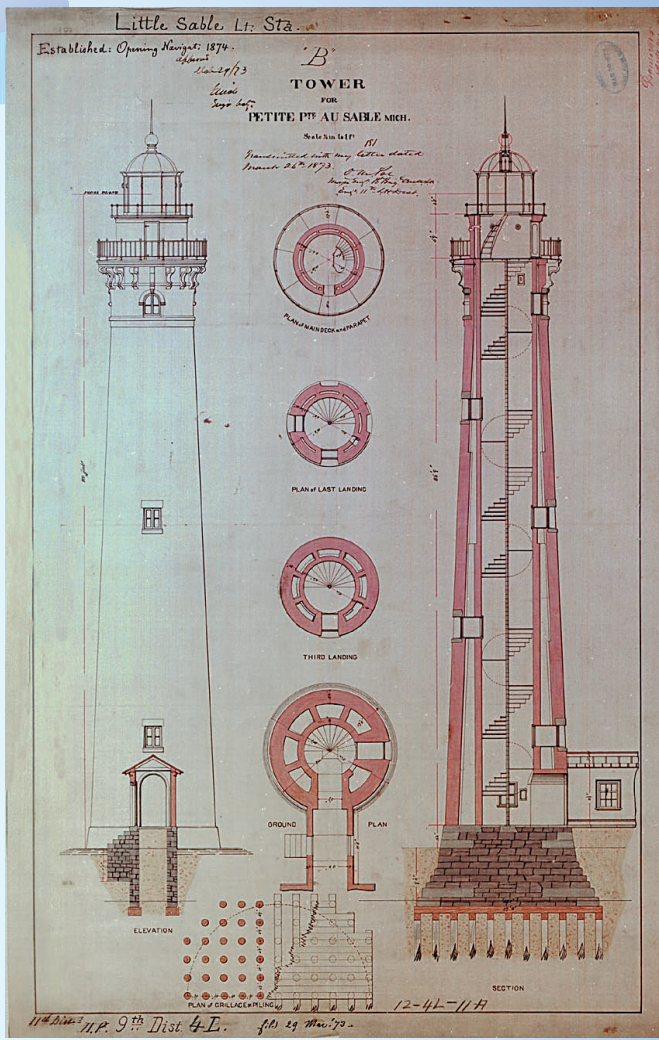
Follow the Lights

To navigate the Great Lakes today, sailors use sophisticated technology including radar (Radio Detection And Ranging), LORAN (Long Range Navigation) and GPS (Global Positioning System). This Time Traveler takes you to the days when sailors had only lighthouses and fog signals to rely on.

Look Inside a Lighthouse

Light towers may be free-standing or connected to a lightkeeper's house. This is how they worked in 1873, before electricity. On the top is the lantern room. It protects the lens. Air vents in the dome let fumes from the fuel exit and prevent moisture from fogging the room. The deck around the lantern room provides the lightkeeper with a safe place to stand when cleaning the glass and a place to watch for ships in trouble.

Below the lantern room, a service room holds the clockworks that turn the lens. The keeper makes repairs and stores fuel and other supplies here. The tower has spiral stairs made of cast iron. The stairs are interrupted by landings on which the keeper rests during many trips up and down each day. The keeper stores supplies on the landings and can look out the windows to check lake conditions.



This is the 1873 architectural drawing for the Petite Pointe Au Sable (Little Sable Point) light tower. (Mackinac Island State Park Commission, State Archives of Michigan) Left, Little Sable Point Light (State Historic Preservation Office)

Two Michigan Lighthouses

Michigan has the longest coastline of the 48 contiguous states and the nation's longest freshwater coastline. Today at least 120 historic lighthouses remain along Michigan's Great Lakes coastline.

The Tawas Point Light and the Copper Harbor Lighthouse are part of the Michigan Historical Museum System. The first Tawas Point light was built in 1852. Then shifting sands changed the shape of Tawas Point. In 1876 a new light tower and attached keeper's house were built closer to the water. The Copper Harbor light has had three designs: an 1848 tower built of stone (no longer standing), an 1866 schoolhouse-type structure and a 1933 metal tower (now used). In 1957 the State of Michigan bought the Copper Harbor lighthouse property from the U.S. Coast Guard and made it part of Fort Wilkins State Historic Park.



Tawas Point Light
(State Historic Preservation Office)

What Is a Lighthouse?

A lighthouse is a structure with a powerful light that gives a steady or flashing signal to navigators. It warns of reefs, shoals or other dangers to ships. Early signal lights were bonfires on a beach or a hill. Because the earth curves, lights on high places could be seen from farther out on the water. So lighthouses became tower structures.

Early Michigan lighthouse lamps were reflectors with flames fueled by whale oil, kerosene or acetylene. The Fresnel lens, available in the 1850s, magnified the light. Electricity began replacing liquid fuels at the end of the 19th century. Most lights today are powered by electricity, some solar generated.

Flashes from Michigan Lighthouse History

- 1825** A light is built to mark the passage between Lake Huron and the St. Clair River at Fort Gratiot. It collapses in a storm and is replaced in 1829. It is the state's oldest surviving lighthouse.
- 1837** The first lightship on the Great Lakes is stationed where Lakes Huron and Michigan meet.
- 1875** The first steam fog signal on Lake Michigan is installed at South Manitou Island Lighthouse.
- 1882** The Stannard Rock Light is built on a rock in Lake Superior to warn of a mile-long treacherous reef.
- 1983** The last Michigan keeper leaves his light when Point Betsie is the last light to be automated in the state.

Saving Lives

Some Michigan lighthouse sites also had life-saving stations. Both large ships and small pleasure boats kept the life-saving crews busy. The *Annual Report of the Operations of the United States Life-Saving Service, 1880*, described these incidents.

“August 23 [1879].—A yacht from Grand Haven, Michigan, with a party of ladies and gentlemen sailing for pleasure, during a strong northwest wind and heavy sea, broke her rudder and was stranded about two miles from the harbor. The crew of Station No. 9 (Grand Haven, Michigan), Eleventh District, who were out drilling on the lake in the immediate vicinity, went at once to the rescue, but experienced great difficulty in the attempt to get alongside the yacht, the heavy sea rendering it almost impossible. After repeated efforts, they succeeded in reaching the yacht and taking her and the three women and two men on board safely into port.”

“May 30 [1880].—Early in the morning, the lookout of Station No. 4, Tenth District, Lake Huron, discovered the schooner *Mona*, of Detroit, riding at anchor, with foremast unstepped and her main-topmast broken off at the cap. She was entirely at the mercy of the sea, which, lashed by a furious gale, was rushing over her. She was about three-quarters of a mile from the station and 200 rods from shore. The life-saving crew went out at 4.20 a.m. in the surf-boat and rendered valuable assistance by running the vessel's hawser through the heavy sea to the tug *George N. Brady*, which arrived soon after they boarded the vessel, and in assisting to heave up her anchors. There were six persons on board.”

Things to Do

- Visit a lighthouse. Check the newspaper for announcements of lighthouses that will be open for public tours during the summer months.
- Learn about the Michigan Lighthouse Project, a program to save Michigan's lighthouses, at www.michiganhistory.org/preserve/lights.
- See a minitour about life and work at the Copper Harbor Lighthouse at www.michiganhistory.org/museum/musewil.
- Learn all you can about a lighthouse and write a story that takes place there.



Lauren LaPine and Ella Clark, students at St. Thomas Aquinas School in East Lansing, examine the Fresnel lens at the Michigan Historical Museum.



Copper Harbor Lighthouse (*Michigan History Magazine*)

At the Museum

- See the lighthouse lens on the third floor mezzanine. The Third-Order Fresnel lens warned ships of the Lansing Shoal at the west entry to the Straits of Mackinac from 1928 to 1985.
- Learn about lighthouse preservation and see a map that shows Michigan lighthouses in the Lakes and Land Gallery.
- Would a lighthouse have saved *Schooner in the Sand*? Decide when you visit this special shipwreck exhibit at the museum until August 18.

The Michigan Historical Museum, 717 W. Allegan St., Lansing, is located two blocks west of the Capitol in downtown Lansing. Museum admission is free. Hours: Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.; Sunday, 1 to 5 p.m. The museum telephone hotline: (517) 373-3559. The museum is part of the Michigan Historical Center, Department of History, Arts and Libraries. Visit us on the Web: www.michiganhistory.org.



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